

THE SIGN OF JONAS

One does not have to be a Christian to know the difference between right and wrong. God has through His creation made known to all mankind both Himself and His moral law. Saint Paul wrote to the Romans, "Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed *it* unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, *even* his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse." (Romans 1:19, 20) Sinful men refuse to acknowledge God, however, and they violate His moral law. So, God leaves them to their sinful natures. They abandon Him, so He abandons them.

After the Great Flood, God called Abraham, and promised to make of him a great nation. The other nations He left alone. Paul and Barnabas told the pagans at Lystra that God "in times past suffered all nations to walk in their own ways." (Acts 14:16) God is forbearing with sinners; yet, His forbearance is not without limit. If a people become too sinful, then God destroys them. So, He destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. So, He threatened to destroy the city of Nineveh.

In the days of the divided monarchy of Israel, God commanded the prophet Jonah to preach to Nineveh its impending destruction. God said to Jonah, "Rise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me." (Jonah 1:2) God told Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach against its evils. Jonah hated the Ninevites, and wished to see God destroy them. He knew, however, that, although God is righteous, He is also merciful. When the Lord revealed His glory to Moses, the Lord said to him:

The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation. (Exodus 34:6, 7)

So, Jonah, knowing the mercy of the Lord, did not wish to preach against their wickedness. He knew that, if the people repented of their sins, then the Lord would forgive them. So, Jonah disobeyed the Lord, and refused to go to Nineveh.

God brought Jonah to Nineveh, however, and there Jonah delivered the Lord's message: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." (Jonah 3:4) Of course, if the Lord were determined to destroy Nineveh, then He would have done so without any warning. As it was, He gave the people fair warning. He gave them time to consider their sins, and to repent of them.

Report of Jonah's preaching eventually reached the king, and, when he heard it, he repented of his sins. As a sign of his repentance, he put off his royal robe, put on humble sackcloth, and sat in ashes. He then issued a decree in which he commanded, "Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water: But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God: yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands." (Jonah 3:7, 8) The king reasoned this way: "Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?" (Jonah 3:9) The king reasoned that, if the people would turn away from their sins, then God may very well change His mind, and turn away from destroying them. The people took to heart the king's decree. They believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth. The king's reasoning was correct. The Scriptures say, "And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do

unto them; and he did it not.” (Jonah 3:10) Because the people repented of their sins, God did not destroy them as He had warned.

The people of Nineveh were not God’s covenant people. Nevertheless, they made in the image of God, and so God cared for them. He would not allow them to continue in great wickedness, but neither did He desire to destroy them.

When the Son of God came into the world, He came to Israel, the covenant people of God. Jesus did much good for them, healing them of sickness and disease. He did these things because of His compassion, and also as a sign that He came from God. Many of the people were hard of heart, however, and refused to believe in Him. Some said He cast out demons by Beelzebub, ruler of demons. Others demanded a special sign, a sign from heaven. Signs are not proof to those that would not believe, but to those that would. Jesus said to them:

This is an evil generation: they seek a sign; and there shall no sign be given it, but the sign of Jonas the prophet. For as Jonas was a sign unto the Ninevites, so shall also the Son of man be to this generation. The queen of the south shall rise up in the judgment with the men of this generation, and condemn them: for she came from the utmost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and, behold, a greater than Solomon is here. The men of Nineve shall rise up in the judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: for they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here. (Luke 11:29–32)

Men ought to have received Jesus’s words on His authority. Even so, He performed miracles as proof. A righteous man believes God on His authority. A good man is helped by proof. A wicked man disregards any sign God gives. Jesus told the people that, because they demanded a sign, they were evil. He told them that no sign such as they sought would be given them. God would give them one great sign. He would give them the sign of Jonah. Just as Jonah miraculously escaped the clutches of death, so would Jesus. The resurrection of the dead would be Jesus’ greatest sign that He is the Son of God. Even so, the wicked men of Jesus’s generation would not believe. Jesus reminded them that the Queen of Sheba traveled to Jerusalem to hear the wisdom of Solomon. The men of Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah. How much greater than Solomon and Jonah is Jesus Christ, the Son of God? Yet, the generation of Israel that had the very Son of God in their midst, would not believe. So, on Judgment Day, the Queen of Sheba and the men of Nineveh would stand in judgment of the men of Israel in Jesus’s time.

Because the men of Nineveh repented of their sins, God spared them, although they were not His covenant people. If God’s covenant people will not repent of their sins, then God will not spare them, even though they are His covenant people. Yet, God’s people do not only hope for forgiveness on condition of their repentance, as the men of Nineveh hoped. They believe and know that He will forgive them because He has promised to do so. In the Book of Psalms, King David wrote, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.” (Psalm 51:17)

Let us understand both the severity and the mercy of God. Let us repent of our sins. Let us believe in Jesus who died for our sins, and rose from the dead.

Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.